

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**SOVIET INTERVENTION IN AFGHANISTAN: ROADMAP TO FAILURE**

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***"My spirit will remain in Afghanistan, even though my soul will go to Allah. My last words to you, my son and successor, are: Never trust the Russians."***

Abdur Rahman Khan, Amir of Afghanistan (1880-1901), considered by western scholars as the "founder of modern Afghanistan"<sup>1</sup>

At the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union decided to intervene militarily in a country as harsh in landscape as it was in lifestyle. Using a conventional force designed for a Warsaw Pact versus NATO showdown on the rolling plains of Central Europe, Soviet planners determined that an offensive operation into Afghanistan would be a quick, easy victory, showcasing Soviet military prowess and establishing control over a landlocked territory bordering six other nations. However, as time would tell, this 1979 incursion into a country roughly the size of Texas was to last for ten years and become what some considered the USSR's version of US involvement in Vietnam.

How did a modern, robust military force get mired in a protracted war in such a desolate country? Armed, equipped, educated, and trained to fight a battle against NATO forces in both the nuclear arena and on the conventional battlefield, the Soviets (1) lacked a clear understanding of the character and conduct of guerilla war (ways), (2) focused on ill-conceived objectives centered on socialist expansion interests (ends), (3) were militarily unprepared to operate against a formidable, tough foe in an unconventional, conflict (means), and (4) failed to recognize vulnerabilities to their strategic approach (risks).

### **The Ways: Soviet Military Doctrine**

To understand how the Soviet military machine would operate in a 1979 Afghan conflict, we must examine the theories in driving military warfighting education in the

USSR. At the time of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, doctrine was firmly entrenched in teachings from varied sources, ranging from political manifestos supporting Marxism-Leninism to thinly veiled studies of Western theorists. First of all, V.I. Lenin, the revolutionary figure leading the Soviet Union out of its Tsarist past through civil war, stressed traditional Marxist concepts of warfare between proletarian and oppressing bourgeois classes. However, evolution of further strategic thought stagnated under Josef Stalin's reign from 1922 until his death in 1953.

Coinciding with Premiere Krushchev's public denunciation of Stalin at the XXII Party Congress in 1961, Marshal V.D. Sokolovskiy published the first serious Soviet attempt at defining military strategy in over 35 years. His first edition of *Military Strategy* in 1962 outlined Soviet precepts of the character and conduct of modern warfare that had developed from 1917 through the Great Patriotic War (1940-1945).<sup>2</sup> This document, updated as a third edition in 1975, was influenced by Carl von Clausewitz's focus on the offense but heavily biased toward Marx and Engels' scientific method as applied to armed conflict. This predisposition ran contrary to Clausewitz's view of war as an art vice a science, stating that "the term 'science' should be kept for disciplines such as mathematics or astronomy, whose object is pure knowledge."<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, Sokolovskiy defined military strategy as "a system of scientific knowledge dealing with the laws of war as an armed conflict in the name of definite class interests" and whose scope includes, not only the art of warfare, but "the *strategic attitudes of the probable opponents*."<sup>4</sup> Of interest is that Sokolovskiy addressed the need for understanding imperialist, "bourgeois" military thinking—stressing the importance of knowing the adversary's mind. This approach will come back later to haunt the Soviets.

Imbedded in the focus on class struggle, Soviet doctrine further emphasized war as an extension of politics<sup>5</sup>. V.I. Lenin, himself a profound but unprofessed Clausewitzian, stressed the importance of offensive operations, although this was later refined as a counter to imperialist aggression as defined by Soviet leadership.<sup>6</sup> In particular, the historical consequences of Winston Churchill's indirect approach in World War II, which extended Russia's war on the eastern front, was to color more Western philosophies of "flexible response," "limited wars," and "escalation of war" as reflections of "imperialist policy" to be shunned by the Soviets.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Soviet operational methodology approaching 1979 was centralized control of a massive, conventional military machine.

The Soviets' failure to recognize the changed nature of warfare led to a traditional approach. First, the military conducted force on force operations, placing concentration of mass on an opposing force in Clausewitzian fashion. The end result, as characterized by one Afghan army colonel, was that Soviet forces were "oversupervised," "lacking initiative," and addicted to "cookbook warfare" where proven "battle recipes" are applied to every situation.<sup>8</sup> This observation leads one to believe that, although based upon theories of Clausewitz and Lenin, the Soviet-Marxist scientific method approach would tend to drive a more Jominian battle, whereby the determination and prescriptive application of "scientific truths of warfare" are more important to success.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the Soviets approached counterinsurgency as an opening for massive reprisals against the local civilian populace, at times eliminating whole groups of people at once. In keeping with V.I. Lenin's approach to civil war, the "destruction of enemy land, collectivization, and deliberate use of famine as a weapon ha[d] been abiding hallmarks of Soviet counterinsurgency operations since 1918."<sup>10</sup> As the Soviet concept

of civil wars stressed conflicts between “progressive” and “reactionary” forces within a nation’s borders, a direct translation into communist versus anti-communist adversaries resulted. The emphasis on reprisal warfare against supposed reactionaries would make it very difficult for the Soviets to gain local support for the puppet regime in Kabul.

### **The Ends: Why Afghanistan?**

In examining Soviet objectives for intervention, one must determine the USSR’s national interest in Afghanistan. First of all, it is important to understand the Soviet mentality within the context of the Cold War. A desire to expand the Soviet sphere of influence, occasionally referred to as the Brezhnev Doctrine,<sup>11</sup> drove policy as an extension of support to any emerging governments with Socialist tendencies. The Soviets, having maintained a long-standing relationship with Afghanistan, recognized an opportunity to expand influence through the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), first established in January 1965. Initially fractured into two competing factions, the Soviets ordered the party’s reunification in 1975 in order to strengthen its ability to retake control of the country. During the Saur Revolution from April 1978-August 1979, the PDPA came to power in a crucial moment for the Soviet leadership, who installed a government more amenable to Soviet guidance. In order to accomplish a successful coup d’état and continue to prop up the subsequent regime, Soviet military intervention and support within Afghanistan’s borders was deemed crucial.

Second, strategic objectives for the occupation of Afghanistan highlighted the Soviet political system’s tendency to freely intermix political goals with military ones. Political leadership provided neither priority nor sequence when applying military,

diplomatic, and economic sources of national power. In reality, emboldened by successes in third world countries such as Angola, the Soviets tended to choose and implement the most effective and expedient approach, which was quite often the military option. As a result, as we scrutinize the attainability of strategic ends, it becomes difficult to determine whether or not military objectives supported political goals. Stated objectives for Afghan intervention included: <sup>12</sup>

**“Protecting the country from the growing force of Islamic fundamentalism at the Soviet border.”** The Soviet Union was clearly concerned with the impact of any religious orientation gaining ground in Afghanistan, as there was a perceived danger of (1) spillover into neighboring Central Asian countries within the Soviet Union, and (2) an undermining of the PDPA’s pro-socialist tilt in government. However, it is unclear how much of an impact Islamic fundamentalism would have had on other countries in the region due to the differing factional and ethnic biases between predominantly Pushtun Afghanistan and the Tajiks and Uzbeks of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, respectively.

**“Justifying its actions with the Brezhnev Doctrine.”** The belief that actions would need to be “justified” under this doctrinal approach of supporting socialism betrays truer intentions in Afghanistan--the desire to prop up a Soviet-installed government. The doctrine should therefore drive decisions, not provide cover for them.

**“Countering Chinese influence in the region and gaining control over the Persian Gulf region.”** Although there is no evidence that China desired a specific role in Afghanistan, Sino-Soviet relations in the 1970s were further strained by Pakistan’s acceptance of Chinese overtures and influence. Still, there is little support for Soviet claims for a desired increase of control over the Persian Gulf region through Afghanistan.

This country, landlocked and lacking much in terms of natural resources, offered little except as a new border to Iran and, with much follow-on travel, eventual overland access to the Persian Gulf proper.

**“Stabilizing the country by garrisoning the main routes, major cities, air bases and logistics sites.”** This traditional approach constituted a typical Tsarist method of garrisoning forces at forts well into the interior of hostile territory while, simultaneously, destroying crops and relocating the local populace. A severe consequence of this scheme was the resulting large number of Afghan refugees fleeing population centers and destroyed farms. Unable to use a common Russian practice of deportation to Soviet camps, this policy would lead to socialization issues within Afghanistan’s borders and create a population hostile not only to the Soviets but to Kabul’s puppet regime.

**“Relieving the Afghan government garrison forces and pushing them into the countryside to battle the resistance; avoiding combat between Soviet occupation forces and the local populace; reorganizing and strengthening the Afghan Army to crush the resistance; providing logistic, air, artillery and intelligence support to Afghan forces; using local forces so as to have minimal Soviet casualties.”** These final five objectives simply reflected an unrealistic desire to avoid Soviet casualties by using poorly trained and motivated Afghan forces to fight—what could be termed as an attempt at “Afghanization” of the conflict. This was not, however, an indication of a lack of military means to conduct the war, but rather a reflection of the lesser degree of commitment on the part of the Soviet leadership.



### **The Means: Conventional Responses to Unconventional Problems**

The Afghanistan invasion was conducted on 24 December 1979 “during the Christmas holidays when Western governments were not prepared to react.”<sup>13</sup> In a move almost an exact replica of the successful 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Soviets moved into Afghanistan with using deception, employing airborne operations to seize key objectives in the capital city of Kabul, replacing the government with individuals of its own choosing, and linking motorized rifle troops with air-landed elements.

In 1979, the Soviet Union possessed the military means to carry out a conventional fight in Afghanistan against regular forces in the field. However, the USSR met serious restrictions to their operations very quickly. First, although time had been available, the Soviets avoided fully mobilization of its own populace, instead relying on large scale use of Central Asian reservists.<sup>14</sup> While at first blush the concept would seem to provide needed communications capabilities with local Afghan populations, most reservists were poorly trained in fighting skills and, as most were either Tajiks or Uzbeks, introduced an ethnic conflict with Afghanistan’s Pushtun majority. Second, Soviet principles of offensive war relied on firepower and mobility to overcome guerilla tactics. Although firepower was available, it was frequently ineffective against guerilla fighters as it continually focused on destroying the enemy’s forces as the main objective. Mobility was hampered by difficult, mountainous terrain and narrow valley floors, limiting large force maneuverability. Communications systems were poor and ineffective. Regular Soviet forces were not trained in counterinsurgency and mountain warfare techniques. Soviet tactics tended toward an over-reliance on motorized operations pushing insurgents into a blocking force in a classic European attack. The overall result was that the means

did not align with the desired ends, a mismatch that eventually would compromise Soviet opportunities for military success.

### **Risks: “A Man’s Gotta Know His Limitations”**

While probably understanding the need for a cost versus benefit analysis, the Soviets failed to fully understand the environment into which they were thrusting themselves. Although a list of explicit planning factors may never have been spelled out, one can still imply some critical assumptions about the conflict based upon a derivation of political and military objectives.<sup>15</sup> First, the USSR likely believed that the PDPA would provide a successful government with socialist orientation. While this may have been the case, a lack of understanding about the Afghan culture and ethnic rivalries created an unsupportable puppet regime. Second, the Soviets believed that interference by outside players was at the heart of the insurgency. Finally, planners thought that a swift and decisive invasion similar to that conducted in Czechoslovakia during 1968 would deter the Afghan guerilla force from attempting combat operations. However, in hindsight, these assumptions would prove to be based upon faulty or, perhaps, wishful thinking.

Soviet leadership also did not understand that the vulnerability to their own strategy was Afghani insurgent strategic thought, an important tenet in Sokolovskiy’s theories apparently either ignored or misinterpreted by a later generation of planners. The character of war had changed, but the USSR remained entrenched in conventional and nuclear strategies of Central Europe. The Afghan insurgents relied on their ability to counter technology with hit and run tactics, waging an unconventional guerilla war

against a militarily superior force—a conflict that the Soviets could never win without significantly altering their military strategy.

### **Implications: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow**

Although the Soviets may have believed that they had learned lessons from US failures in Vietnam, they failed to develop and implement a sound counterinsurgency strategy that would build upon these mistakes. Soviet leadership misread the situation by focusing on Afghanistan through glasses tinted by socialist ideology, installing a government that was unpopular with the Afghan people and using a military force unprepared for guerilla war. Costs to the Soviet Union for this ten year conflict were staggering—20,000 killed, 35,478 wounded, over 30,000 dead from disease, and an annual price tag of approximately \$2.7 billion from 1980 until troop withdrawal in 1989.<sup>16</sup>

In today's world after a momentous September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the immediacy for applying Soviet lessons learned is even more crucial. As coalition forces led by the US fight the Taliban in Afghanistan with conventional and special forces, it is expected that US military planners understand Soviet mistakes, so as not to complete the strategic development circle of errors existing since US involvement first started in Vietnam. Based upon the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, US leadership must (1) cultivate clear and measurable objectives (ends), (2) ensure military forces are combined or modified as needed and provided with proper resources (means), (3) assess strategic concepts for counterinsurgency operations to avoid fighting yesterday's war (ways), and recognize strategic concept vulnerabilities that could, as it was in 1979, be acted against by Afghan

forces (risks). It is worth mentioning that the US should recognize that “the Afghan’s strength in war has little to do with military proficiency, and everything to do with will and honor.”<sup>17</sup> Future regional conflicts may well be similar, although never identical, in nature to what the Soviets faced in 1979 and what the US faces today. It will, nevertheless, remain important to understand the lessons drawn from Soviet intervention if only to remind ourselves of the importance in developing military strategies honestly and with great rigor, avoiding cookie-cutter attempts at applying book solutions of methodology to war.

### **Conclusion**

The Soviet experience in Afghanistan illustrated how a powerful country with impressive resources can meet failure face to face if it does not recognize the changing character and associated conduct of war. Military strategies must support political goals through well-defined objectives. The forces must be ready to alter themselves as necessary to meet the emerging threat in a way that is appropriate for the specific situation, preferably prior to conflict initiation. Strategic concepts must be rooted in learned examination of the conflict’s character and forged through a clear understanding of the nature of war. Unlike Soviet leadership of 1979, future war planners must honestly evaluate costs versus benefits and be able to determine how the adversary can negate any military strategy. The Soviet inability to understand the character and conduct of guerilla war left its forces militarily unprepared to fight the insurgency of an enemy that was little understood and highly underestimated. The price for these errors was loss of treasure, home front support, and international credibility.

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## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Khan Abdur Rahman, "Quotes from Afghan Personalities of Yesterday and Today," in *Afghanistan Online*, available from <http://www.afghan-web.com/history/quotes.html>; Internet; accessed October 23 2001, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> V.D. Sokolovskiy, *Soviet Military Strategy*, 3d ed., ed. Harriet Scott (New York: Crane, Russak, & Company, Inc, 1975), xviii.

<sup>3</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 148.

<sup>4</sup> Sokolovskiy, 8, 9, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Antonio Pelliccia, "Clausewitz and Soviet Strategy," *Military Review* 56, no. 8 (August 1976): 27.

<sup>6</sup> Alan J Vick, "Soviet Military Forces and Strategy Come of Age: Implications for American Deterrence Theory," *Air University Review* (Jan-Feb 1981) [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/aureview/1981/jan-feb/vick.htm>; Internet; accessed October 12, 2001, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Sokolovskiy, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>9</sup> John Shy, "Jomini," *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 162.

<sup>10</sup> A.Z Hilali, "Afghanistan: The Decline of Soviet Military Strategy and Political Status," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 12, no. 1 (March 1999): 102.

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: A Study in the Use of Force in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1986), 172.

<sup>12</sup> Hilali, 97.

<sup>13</sup> Hilali, 97.

<sup>14</sup> Collins, 80.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>16</sup> Hilali, 114.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Kidd, "How Afghan Men Fight." *Christian Science Monitor* (October 1, 2001); available from <http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/1001/p11s1-coop.html>; Internet; accessed October 16 2001, 1.